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MIND BODY SPIRIT therapies

GARDEN VARIETY

A bright yellow flower with a rich folkloric history, **St. John's wort** has bumped Prozac out of the headlines. Remember Prozac? Once the media's biggest medical story, the controversial drug put depression on the front pages. Well into the '90s—the FDA approved the synthetic antidepressant in 1987—smug cover stories in magazines predicted dosed-up millions marching off to newly exhilarating jobs and functional relationships. We have yet to see that result, but awareness of depression as a treatable disease keeps rising (a recent ad for a halitosis cure cited depression as a possible consequence of bad breath). Last year had its very own depression-related story: hypericum, a/k/a St. John's wort.

Long used as a folk treatment for wounds and digestive ailments, the herb has seen a recent frenzy of attention here as new medical studies and books cite its effectiveness as an antidepressant. European physicians, who view natural remedies with less suspicion than their American counterparts, have used the herb to treat depression for about 15 years, and it's currently Germany's leading antidepressant. The sudden explosion of publicity on U.S. shores is fortuitously timed: as more Americans become aware of depression as a treatable disease and consult doctors about it, St. John's wort provides a promising alternative to synthetic prescription drugs like Prozac, Paxil, and Zoloft. Depression affects about 20 million adult Americans per year.

The herb works on the brain the same way Prozac and similar drugs do: it regulates the flow of the natural mood-enhancing neurotransmitters serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine and prevents their quick reabsorption by brain cells. Medical studies show that the best results are obtained from taking 300 milligrams three times a day, and some doctors recommend only products containing 0.3 per cent hypericin, the active ingredient. The herb can be found—when it's not sold out—in several forms at drug and health food stores: in tablets, capsules, powder, oil, liquid, dried leaves, and tea bags. "It's one of our top sellers," said Wilson Morales, assistant manager at a Duane Reade in midtown Manhattan.

But patients won't feel any clouds lifting instantly. St. John's wort usually takes two to six weeks to start working, and has yielded results only in cases of mild and moderate depression. "It wasn't dramatic," said one patient who used it for a few months. "It wasn't like the world went from black-and-white to color, but I felt a little more motivated and like I can pull things together. I got off the tightrope and never had to look back." Cases of severe depression generally respond better to synthetic medications.

Hypericum perforatum, the Latin name, means "over an apparition" and refers to the herb's use in folk medicine as a repellent for evil spirits. The common name, St. John's wort comes from the traditional belief that the plant blossoms most abundantly on John the Baptist's birthday in June. In *The Healing Power of Herbs*, Michael Murray claims that Hippocrates, Dioscorides, and Pliny, physicians in ancient Greece and Rome, used the herb to treat many illnesses.

With so much information around, some of it contradictory, it's best to check with a doctor before trying St. John's wort. Patients experiencing symptoms of depression—anxiety, restlessness, insomnia, a reduced appetite, and

an inability to feel pleasure—should get a professional diagnosis and tell their doctor that they intend to try an herbal remedy. Even though products containing hypericum are now widely available without a prescription, and both medical and anecdotal reports tout the relative lack of side effects, the herb can cause unwanted reactions when combined with other substances, especially other antidepressants. Patients already taking synthetic medications for depression should consult their doctors before switching to St. John's wort.

Much of the hype has focused on the fact that the herb can be self-administered without the burden of medical fees. But even after a visit to the doctor's office, hypericum ends up costing much less than Prozac and other synthetics, which require regular doctor visits. The recommended dosage of hypericum will cost about 50 cents a day, compared to anywhere from \$2.50 to \$7 a day for prescription antidepressants.

In *Hypericum and Depression*, the oft-quoted Harold Bloomfield, M.D., calls the herb "medically proven," but opinions vary. A 1994 study of 3250 people in the *Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry and Neurology* showed 80 per cent of patients getting positive results from the herb. Only 2.4 per cent in that study had side effects: stomach irritation, mild allergic reactions like skin rashes, and restlessness. (Animals grazing on large quantities of the herb have gotten sick from exposure to the sun, but phototoxicity has not yet been observed in people.) A recent report in the *British Medical Journal* analyzing a number of different studies found that the herb worked almost three times better than a placebo, and that 10.8 per cent of patients experienced side effects, whereas 36 per cent of those on synthetic medications had side effects—including nausea, insomnia, and a decreased sex drive.

Clinical studies conducted so far have observed subjects for eight weeks or less, so questions remain about whether the herb continues to treat depression effectively over a longer period and whether negative side effects start appearing in more patients over time. A large study planned by the National Institutes of Health will try to answer these questions. The drug is also now being studied as a treatment for AIDS and some types of cancer.

Check out bookstores: online, Amazon.com currently lists four titles about the herb. Also search the Net, where Web sites and newsgroups discussing the herb keep multiplying. A recent search yielded 559 items. Contradictions abound, of course, but so do testimonials. —SALMA ABDELNOUR

HEALING HERBS

My friend Francis swore by Dr. Li's healing herbs. True, Francis is an art director and not a doctor, but so what? Western medicine is powerless against that sore-throat, chest-cough, lasts-forever viral thing that everybody seems to get right at the beginning of winter. So I figured it couldn't hurt to see Dr. Li Ying Ng, Chinese herbalist.

A spry old immigrant trained in China, Dr. Li got right down to business. From a pocket in her white lab coat, she whipped out a small device with a point on one end and a meter on another. Slowly, she moved the point around the curve of my ear. Like a Geiger counter, it clicked—sometimes slowly, and sometimes so fast and loud I thought she'd found a nuclear waste dump in my ear canal.

Chinese medicine interprets the body through the ear, Dr. Li

explained. Certain spots represent certain parts of the body—such as my fiery sore throat. Based on where the Geiger counter went wild, Dr. Li made a diagnosis and prescribed herbs.

The pharmacy was a wall covered from floor to ceiling with tiny wooden drawers. As Dr. Li barked out orders, an assistant climbed a rolling library ladder and, with acrobatic dexterity, retrieved the medicinal herbs. They were presented to me in pouches of crisp white butcher paper. Dr. Li gave me the instructions: Take one pouch, boil the contents in water for a full hour, then drink the broth.

To me, the word "herb" connotes dainty little flakes, like oregano or tarragon. But these herbs looked like the forest floor: long strips of brown bark, huge white half-disks that reminded me of fairy-tale mushrooms, spiky balls that looked like gigantic prehistoric seeds. As these "herbs" boiled, they filled the apartment with the powerful odor of soil.

Then it was time to drink the thick brown bouillon. I stared at the liquid, swirled it around in the bowl. I inhaled a big whiff, which made me shudder in fear. Was I really going to drink this? But my throat burned and my head pounded, so what the hell. Could it really get any worse? Actually, yes. The broth tasted like liquid dirt, inducing spasms close to retching.

"Bitch's brew," Francis concurs, but he still swears by the stuff, even rhapsodizes about it. "You're drinking earth itself, that from which all life sprang. And all medicine comes from the earth. What do you think vitamins are? And why do you think pharmaceutical companies send teams of botanists into the rain forest? They're hunting for the herbs and essences shamans have used for centuries." Besides, he says, I got off easy. His brother Michael once bought some herbs that contained live bugs—"locusts or something." But then, Michael bought those herbs on the street! Michael is now taking premed courses at Columbia so he can become a doctor and prescribe medicine on his own. Cause and effect? You be the judge.

Back when I was sick, I managed to drink every last drop of Dr. Li's broth. Exhausted, both from the illness and from the Herculean effort to drink the medicine, I dropped into a heavy slumber. Did I feel better the next day? I couldn't tell. But I boiled the herbs and, wincing and sputtering, drank the broth again, exactly as directed. On the third and last day, I did so with a perverse delight. Forget about NyQuil and aspirin. I was doing goddamned chemotherapy. I downed the vile potion with an antic grimace. I thought, "If my virus dislikes this stuff even half as much as I do, then it must be in agony."

That's when I had an idea. Maybe these herbs don't attack the virus itself, maybe they rally my immune system. Maybe the therapeutic power of the potion lies simply in this: my body knows that if it doesn't squash the illness it will have to drink this stuff again and again. And, believe me, that would be enough incentive for an immune system to beat back anything.

I haven't been back to Dr. Li in years, but Francis keeps a stash of her herbs in his cupboard. He says, "I only pull it out when I really need some medicine." —MARK SCHOOF

Dr. Li Ying Ng, 115 Mott Street, 966-0890

IN A DARK TIME

"I pulled into a parking space at the mall. I was exhausted and the thought of walking to the entrance